

On Stigma and Humiliation, Henry (Hank) Greenspan, DRAFT July 25, 2021.

It is part of Jewish tradition to wrestle with texts (as with each other!), even the most revered. Thus the Torah has its commentaries, its commentaries on the commentaries, and an understanding that there will always be further commentaries. There are no final answers, at least not before the Messiah comes and the world is healed. But, from a Jewish perspective—or at least mine—I’m guessing that even then we would continue to raise questions, suggest alternative interpretations, and make (hopefully good) trouble.

We expect discussion and debate—even with God, if the situation calls for it. Noah, Abraham, Moses, and other founders eventually went with the program. But not without seeking clarification and, at times, negotiation. “On the other hand, let’s talk about it.” That may be one of the secular first principles of our tradition.

Two streams follow in response to the quote from Rabbi Heschel. The first is to parse. “What *have* I done today?”: So taking account happens late in the day, after whatever has or has not happened? Why not start in the morning with “*will* do”? Does it matter?

“*The* anguish”; “*the* evil.” Which ones? There is a lot of both in the world. Does it matter which we try to “mitigate”? Clearly, alleviating suffering in general would not seem to meet the criteria. The daily work of a dedicated physician, for example, or that of a good parent, teacher, or plumber obviously contribute to the general good and reduce the potential bad. But would a teacher reflecting, “I had some great classes today” be sufficient taking—and settling—that day’s account? I am not sure. And does the notion of *degrees* of “alleviation” matter? I am also not sure.

In any case, the word that really caught my attention was “humiliation.” Here, there is no “the.” It is humiliation as a discrete phenomenon that is more specific than either “anguish” or “evil.” I would guess that most people, listing the anguishes and evils of the world, would not even mention humiliation near the top of their list. And here the text is about “preventing,” not alleviating as earlier. I find all of this profoundly evocative.

And so I am led to the second stream, which concerns what we mean by “humiliation” and what may help counter it.

I learn that the word “humiliation” is related to the Latin “humiliare,” to “humble.” Being humbled, as we normally understand it, is often a good thing. But perhaps we can say those who humiliate are short on humility—perhaps extremely short. And very long on presumption, pretention, and—in some cases—cruelty.

I say “in some cases” because I believe that a great deal of humiliating. is not deliberately targeted and may even be experienced as compassion. In particular, I think of my friends who are Holocaust survivors and with whom I have worked for over fifty years. Echoing many others, Agi Rubin, a closest friend and co-author, recalled about her first years in the United

States.: “We were ashamed. We were *made* to feel ashamed. So I covered up. ‘I’m fine, Joe. *That’s* not me! How are you?”

The “that” to which Agi refers is the view of survivors as exotic “damaged goods”—Guilty, ghostly, and estranged (or, in contemporary lingo, “deeply traumatized.”). Even after survivors achieved a kind of celebrity status—which began in the late 1970s in the U.S.—they continued to be a “that.” Agi once exclaimed. “I am not a quote-unquote, capital S, ‘Holocaust Survivor.’ OK, I survived. But I am not ‘The Survivor.’ I am not a category. Not a thing. We have enough experience being categories.”

To be engaged as a “category,” a “that,” is the essence of stigma and, I would suggest, of much humiliation. As Erving Goffman taught us long ago, we often “gift” those whom we patronize (and thus humiliate) with compensatory “honors.” Thus cancer patients become “warriors” who are expected to “battle” their disease. “Survivors” (of almost everything) are celebrated for their exemplary “resilience,” transcendence of victimhood, “triumphant human spirit.” Blind black people are expected to be some version of Ray Charles or Stevie Wonder.

In short, pedestals quarantine as readily as consulting rooms. Goffman wrote that stigmatized people—in whatever valence—are experienced as “not quite human.” But there is more. What I have noticed over the years is that Holocaust survivors are often disproportionately grateful for *whatever* recognition they receive. My fellow cancer patients are also generally careful not to offend—to their face--those who attempt solicitude. Along with decency and compassion, that reticence also reflects the fear of losing (again) even that small bit. One ought not bite the hand that pats you on the head, even from patronizing altitude. As a consequence, the stigmatized person also learns how to deal—along with everything else--with humiliation in relative isolation.

All of this is to suggest that humiliation is much more common than we typically assume. It does not require degrading epithets. It may be entirely devoid of hatefulness of any kind. It often reflects the everyday ways we conflate people with their histories or circumstances. So survivors (again of all kinds) become epiphenomena of the Holocaust, cancer, blindness, blackness, rape, and so on. Rather than being people exactly like ourselves—indeed, *as* ourselves—who have also endured or are enduring whatever circumstances. Rather than being our comrades and brothers and sisters.

My own spiritual mentor, William James, once wrote, “What most horrifies me in life is our brutal ignorance of one another.” Combatting “brutality” of this kind does not require protest or obvious acts of resistance. It does require living closer to the ground (I also learn that “humility” is related to “humus,” the ground) rather than at 50,000 feet. It requires engaged and genuine conversation rather than presumption. It requires exquisite attentiveness, patience, and time.

With mixed results, that is what I aspire to find and facilitate every day.

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